

The Fluidity of Gender in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

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Abstract: This article attempts to analyze the concept of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) from the standpoint of queer theory. Winterson's corpus reveals in very seminal ways that feminist and queer movements are inherently different from one another. Aspects such as gender, sex, love and determinacy are explored in the text which is integral to queer theory. Predominantly due to her own life experience, themes related to religious, familial, and sexual betrayal find a salient place in her novels. *Written on the Body* is a painfully intimate first-person account of love won and lost. It is related by an ungendered, unnamed, sexually plural, spatially dislocated, unfixed, and, for a novel called *Written on the Body*, curiously disembodied narrator. Though Winterson's primary concern in the novel is with the language, the issues of gender that she tackles in the novel cannot be ignored. The novel offers constructive ways of theorizing the human body. Winterson develops a critique of androcentric science and medicine that strives to know the female body by dissecting it, analogous to the way modern society compartmentalizes human lives into neat manageable units. Against this, a concept of wholeness is strategically employed. As such *Written on the Body* has progressively de-emphasized plot and character; examines the nature of love, time, art, sexuality, self-discovery, and the evocative power of language and storytelling.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, subjectivity, queer narratives.

In her fictions, Winterson seeks to challenge conventional thinking in an attempt to transgress gender boundaries; many of her narrators are androgynous, and areas related to the discovery of the self are usually involved in turbulent lesbian love affairs. Sexual passion, in all its dilemmas and even vindictiveness, also has been coherently expressed and reflected in her works. Winterson's lesbianism may be displaced in many interpretations of her novels but writers like Cath Stowers offers an analysis centered in a discourse of specifically lesbian desire in Winterson's fiction by arguing that 'the imagery of exploration and travel, consistently present in Winterson's writing, serves to stimulate her text within a complex, but identifiable, context of sexual politics' (Maynard and Purvis 6). While Winterson herself has further problematized the issue with her reluctance at being cast as a 'feminist' or 'radical lesbian.' Nonetheless, she is without doubt a self-promoting, visible and *out* author, at other times making it abundantly clear that the contours of female authorship are here defined in specifically *lesbian* terms claiming that identities are not fixed, they cannot be categorized and labeled because identities consist of many varied components and that to

categorize by one characteristic is wrong. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes that one should consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not what one is but what one does. Gender is created by action, by a condition one enacts; one becomes a man or a woman by repeated acts which depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing something in a culture. Just as there are regular, socially established ways of acting like making promises and getting married, so are there socially established ways of being a man or a woman. This does not mean that gender is a choice, a role one puts on, because in the regime of gender one cannot be a person without being a male or female. Judith Butler writes:

subjected to gender but subjectivated by gender the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves (Butler 235).

In that respect the 'I' narrator is the transformation of modern queer theory into a fictitious character and it mirrors Judith Butler's assumptions about gender and identity. She explains that heterosexual logic conflates identification and desire: “If one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender” (Butler 128). From this viewpoint, the utterance “it's a girl” or “it's a boy” by which a baby is traditionally welcomed into the world initiates a continuous process of “girling or boying” the making of a girl or a boy through an assignment of compulsory repetition of gender norms. To be a subject at all is to be given this assignment of repetition but Butler asserts that in carrying out the assignment, there lie a gap, the possibilities for resistance and change. Jeanette Winterson is one of the prominent lesbian writers who strive to assert an identity other than the accepted realms of man and woman and this preoccupation finds expression in almost all her works. In Winterson's opinion, the binary opposition between man and woman; heterosexual and homosexual; and mind/body are dissolved. These binary challenging bodies are, moreover connected with the construction of identities. On this aspect, Patricia Duncker, too, labels Winterson's writing as 'queer' which by her definition:

...calls attention to the instability of gender. Queer undermines fixed, settled, heterosexual discourses. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is fluid and unstable. [...]. Gender is performance. The body becomes ambiguous. Therefore, power and knowledge cannot be so easily allocated to the masculine in queer discourses. Queer is a gender game. Direct action rather than lobbying is characteristic of queer politics, just as within the revolutionary moment of feminism. Queer is an attitude, a look, a style. Queer calls attention to itself. (Duncker 85)

Written on the Body is a painfully intimate first-person account of love won and lost. The narrator falls in love with a beautiful married woman, Louise, who, five months into the relationship, is revealed to have cancer. The narrator strikes a bargain with Louise's husband, Elgin, a doctor, who agrees to treat Louise only if the narrator abandons her. The narrator decamps for Yorkshire, without telling Louise, after several months

departs again for London in a futile search for her, and returns north to face an uncertain future. The opening line of *Written on the Body* asked "Why is the measure of love loss?" (Winterson 9). She denotes the undeniable and ever-present beauty of being left and of leaving, transcending the conventional perceptions of loss and its means of existence, namely time. Winterson presented a body which questioned gender identity through a complete absence of gender identification, with no physical description of the narrator's body throughout the novel. The use of this first person narrative echoes Judith Butler's theories of gender. This theory provided insight into the subversive status of the ungendered narrator. According to Butler, gendering, or assuming sex, is part of a complex process that constitutes subjects, while ushering them into the symbolic realm while allowing the appropriation of the "speaking 'I'" (Butler 3). Butler goes on to explain that the formation of the subject simultaneously produces a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. Using s/he and him/her also seems to be inappropriate since they too reinforce, through language, the binary understanding of gender. The narrator is not part 'she' and part 'he', but rather is something other, which perhaps could be described as the slash between her and him rather than as the words on either side. Hence the narrator's body is indeed invisible to any objectifying gaze because it can be seen as male, female, hermaphroditic, transgender, differently abled, from any culture in the world. The self too could have a passion for any sexual orientation and the reader is left undistracted by the mechanics of the affair and is instead able to focus on the emotion.

Winterson occasionally hints that the narrator is male. For instance, a friend advises the narrator to 'play the sailor and run a wife in every port', (Winterson 40) and the narrator is compared to a 'parody of a sporting colonel', (Winterson 77) but such masculine associations are also offset by the use of more feminine terms, as when the narrator says, 'I'm not beautiful', (Winterson 85) rather than 'I'm not handsome', figuratively speaking, the narrator has no penis with which to penetrate with because s/he is very concerned with language, more so than with the feelings of Louise, the narrator's lover. Analogously, in some of the relationships the narrator recounts how s/he occupies a more pervasive traditionally female role. For instance, at one time when s/he states, "I was Judith's bottom," Bathsheba (the narrator's previous lover) gives the narrator an emotional clap. But at other times the narrator occupies more conventionally male roles; these are reflected "as back door man" or a "tweedy big game hunter." His/her former lovers range from Bruno, Carlo, Crazy Frank to Inge, Catherine, Judith, Estelle, Bathsheba and Jacqueline. In fact, these romantic relationships seem less determined by sexual object choice, the conventions of gendered behaviour or an alignment between gender and sexual behaviour than by the narrator's ongoing vacillation between the desire for sexual excitement and risk and

the desire for comfort and emotional safety. For instance, after relating the story of intense lovemaking with a married woman, she returns to her husband. The narrator concludes that “such things lead the heart-sore to the Jacqueline's of this world but the Jacqueline's of this world lead to such things. Is there no other way? Is happiness always a compromise?” (Winterson 74). By constructing a lover or narrator whose gender remains undeclared, Winterson manages to unsettle perceptions of gendered difference. The reason for Winterson employing an ungendered, bisexual character is somewhat similar to the arguments used by Monique Wittig in *The Straight Mind* (1992). Wittig aligns the sign 'lesbian' with neither masculinity nor femininity, so too is Winterson's view of the genderless narrator in *Written on the Body* as it is an attempted escape from the effects of gender dichotomies. Wittig opines that the 'imposition of gender' deny women 'any claim to the abstract, philosophical, political discourses that give shape to the social body' (Wittig 81). The narrator in *Written on the Body* is ambiguously and provocatively ungendered and s/he is free to pick up and plunder varying masculine discourses, especially while dissecting and analyzing the language of medicine and exploration. However, the absence of any declaration of gender is not suggesting that gender has no power, but rather reflects that gender dichotomies can be upset, as like the trajectory of mixed-gendered bisexuality. Hence it can be understood that in the novel, Winterson puts the concept of 'woman' under erasure and displaces the phallic body and subject (of exploration, of medicine, and of language) with a lesbian body and subject which is founded on reciprocity and, no doubt, this displacement is achieved through the use of bodily journeys and explorations.

According to Duncker, “we live, supposedly, in a time without certainties; a time when all identities and subjectivities are suspect, unstable. It is no longer clear what a lesbian is, let alone who is one” (Grice and Woods 78). Winterson attempts to state that the narrator's gender doesn't matter, that it can be both, that it changes. The novel seems to echo many of Helene Cixous concerns, both thematically and formally. There is apparent replication of heterosexual patterns of travel, exploration and desire especially in terms of anatomical possession and penetration, 'I took her two hands to my mouth and kissed each slowly so that I could memorize the shape of her knuckles. I didn't only want Louise's flesh. I wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues, the sinews that bound her together' (Winterson 50-1). These lines suggest that the narrator's excursions and explorations into Louise's body are not reiterations of masculine penetrative pioneering into passive femaleness, but rather they are an instance of lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh and that anatomical investigations can partly be read as the expression of that lesbianism which represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast and bone. And taking the viewpoint of traditional lesbian writers, a woman's body is compared to brewing qualities of blood and yeast (Stowers 91).

Throughout Winterson's work, female characters frequently excavate the female body in a re-appropriation and parodying of the power of the phallus. In *Written on the Body*, these corporeal explorations are often figured in terms which are admittedly and initially highly suggestive of the penetration of the passive female body by the active male. Instances like: I began a voyage down her spine, the cobbled road of hers that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley then a deep pit to drown in (Winterson 82) continue to denote that the narrator's mind and thoughts come into focus and build the ground upon which the reader perceives her/his personality. That leads to the discovery that identity is not dependent on bodily functions or hormones. Furthermore the sexual activeness and eventual passion of the genderless narrator denotes to us that libido and sexual preferences are not dependent on the physical sex either.

Although all the other characters, except the narrator, are gendered, their sexual object choices, namely in terms of the way in which they like to have sex, and the feelings they bring to relationships and sexual encounters, are all distinct. Each individual's different desires and needs, which are constructed as functioning independently of gender, make each sexual experience unique. For instance, the narrator explains that one ex-girlfriend only liked to have sex outdoors, while another female lover could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o'clock. In one episode in the novel, Carlo made the narrator shave off all body hair, while Crazy Frank, who had a passion for miniatures, told the narrator after having sex that s/he would be perfect if s/he was smaller. Through descriptions of the narrator's ex-lovers' sexual differences, the text disrupts traditional ways of thinking about sexuality. No longer configured in terms of man/woman and gay/straight, sexuality is constructed as pure difference, and is regarded to be the coming together of unique bodies possessing different desires. The performing of gender roles through technology certainly occurs in this novel where the use of the computer (and medical) technology is firmly in the hands of the male, namely Elgin. Louise's husband, Elgin, is a frequent user of computer technology. He is a medical doctor researching carcinoma and the presence of computers in his life is used to represent and provide a locus for the lack of passion in his life. He is caught in the trap of cultural consumerism that has poisoned his marriage and his relationship with his own devout Jewish parents. Elgin's computer-filled existence is presented in opposition to the romantic passions of the lovers, namely they who, take walks in the rain, notice and enjoy the changing of seasons, and engage in sexual activity. They are presented as being rich in spirit, as compared to Elgin's spiritual emptiness. Elgin has, in a way; replaced God with medical and computer technology. The character of Elgin serves to fulfill one line of Winterson's enquiry into the body and technology. Winterson is displaying the depth of her concern, or anxiety, about the approaching technological crescendo. From Winterson's own standpoint, the narrator's relationship to technology is a difficult one which is fraught with contradiction.

In its exploration of the narrator's love for Louise and Louise's affection for her in turn, intercut with memories of previous love affairs and in his/her description of Louise's affection for her, the novel seems to echo many of Cixous' concerns, both thematically and formally. The section on skin refers to 'those ramified blood vessels that write the body's longing' (Winterson 124), making Louise's body flush with desire. And what is written on the body can also be a language of its own:

Articulation of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? ... you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body ... Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there....I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands (Winterson 89).

The point is that the narrator's gender really does not seem to matter for Winterson and opines that in our most intimate relationships, where we might expect it to matter most, gender is unimportant. Only the quality of love counts. The narrator, a proper modernist, knows that "a precise emotion," his/her singular love for Louise, "demands a precise expression". Yet he/she is frequently forced to admit that linguistically he/she is often "trapped in a cliché every bit as redundant as my parent's roses round the door" and to wonder "why...I collude in this misuse of language" (Winterson 21). The more this clever wordsmith and translator, this linguist of love, a struggle to be truthful and precise, the more he/she is forced to admit that "I love you" is always a quotation, always filled with the history and intentions of others. And if every utterance—even the most heartfelt and authentic—always arises from the already said, one can never be new or original, and the narrator will never be able to recover in language the singularity of Louise.

Also questioning whether Louise is perhaps insistently bi-gendered in her behaviour (if not physically). She is the aggressor in initiating the relationship with the narrator even to the extent of leaving her husband Elgin for him/her, Louise states that she wants him/her to possess her (Winterson 52). The narrator also refers to her using masculine metaphors instead of feminine ones. In terms of the self she remains, a knight in shining armor (Winterson 123), cocked and ready to fire (Winterson 136), a Roman Cardinal (to the narrator's choir body) (Winterson 67). In the presence of Louise, the narrator is a child, an anchorite, and, in an amazingly gender indeterminate description, "She kissed me and in her kiss lay the complexity of passion. Lover and child, virgin and *roué*. Had I ever been kissed before? I was as shy as an unbroken colt. ... Her taste was fresh on my mouth, but would she stay? I quivered like a schoolgirl" (Winterson 81-2). Remapping those old dichotomies of lover and beloved based on heterosexuality and domination into an almost fluid and fluctuating exchange of self and other in the novel, suggested that symbolic gender differences become undercut by lesbian metaphors of sameness. Clinical explorations based

along masculine lines become rejected in favour of reciprocal journeys where Self and Other can exchange positions as objects of the quest, and also as a source of pleasure, thereby reversing that paradigm of active male explorer and passive female land by figuring his/her self in those very terms. When the narrator eventually leaves Louise, it reflects men's inability to commit - a failure of commitment and an act of cowardice which is perhaps a more stereotypically male trait than female. Because the narrator's sexual and gender identity are rendered consistently undecidable, and because he/she comes to us through a series of masks, roles, performances, quotations, translations, *Written on the Body*, among its other effects, dislocates readers from easy or consistent identification or dis-identification with the gendered positions held out by conventional romance plots—whether heterosexual or lesbian. At the same time, the extreme intimacy created by the first person point of view and compounded by the intimate confessional nature of the narrator's descriptions, invite, even demand, our sympathy—if not always our identification or approval.

In *Written on the Body*, the first person narration also always raises the possibility of the narrator's unreliability and this fact is compounded by direct statements of self-doubt on the narrator's part along with contradictory statements that suggest his/her unreliability, or, at the very least lack of self-awareness. For instance, early on in his/her account of the relationship with Louise, the narrator wonders, "Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology" (Winterson 15) and shortly thereafter directly addresses the reader: "You're wondering if I can be trusted as a narrator" (Winterson 24). In the end of the novel, Louise reappears, but her appearance whether in person or in the narrator's fantasy is unknown. Accused of fabrication by Inge ("You're making it up") (Winterson 22) the narrator wonders "Am I" and later asks him/herself "Did I invent her [Louise]?" (Winterson 189). The narrator's lack of self-awareness, even is emotionally obtuse, is reinforced by discrepancies between his/her accounts of relationships and the reported reactions of other characters in the text. He/she may resist being "read" and known by Louise and others "never unfold too much, tell the whole story" (Winterson 89), but, in fact, the novel suggests that he/she is something of an open book. After recounting his/her failure, remorse and regret, the narrator presents a two-paragraph description of Louise standing in the kitchen door, which may or may not be materially true, and one paragraph describing the emotional impact of her (supposed) re-embodiment: "The walls are exploding...I stretch out my hand and reach the corner of the world...I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields" (190). While Winterson gives the illusion that we are experiencing the precise moment to which the entire novel has been leading, in fact it closes on freeze frame of sorts in which presence and absence, reality and fantasy co-exist. The novel's final pages then represents memory, negation, loss, distance, and disembodiment and reunion, affirmation, presence.

The novel, *Written on the Body* calls for dissolution of boundaries and binaries and identifying the narrator as a lesbian would only reinstall these gender lines. On examining the text it can be concluded that the ungended narrator in Winterson's *Written on the Body* is not a mere a device to attract the reader's attention, but rather is a device that challenges dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. Winterson's text constructs a world in which, obtaining the status of subject is not contingent upon gendering, or assuming sex. The text states that Winterson imagines a world in which the ungended self has come to matter. *Written on the Body* can thus be viewed as an imaginative attempt to deregulate desire, freeing it from the regulatory and disciplinary binary regimes of gender and sexuality. In their place, the text imagines a freer, more fluid view of sexuality which is based upon difference. By constructing a lover or narrator whose gender remains undeclared, Winterson manages to unsettle perceptions of gendered difference thereby disturbs fixed boundaries and rigidly gendered identities that objectify the body in order to build up a concept of the body that is fluid and leaves room for changes and merging with other bodies, where bodies are held together not by a stable body image and a gendered identity, but by forces of connection and interaction between parts of the body. Winterson, paradoxically, both proves the remarkable tenacity of inherited scripts and, at the same time, remakes the love story as a site of paradox, as an experience of limits.

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